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ABSTRACT

In the context of a discussion of the role of developmental education in the nation's community colleges, this paper responds to criticisms of developmental education that have been made in recent years. First, the paper considers the role of developmental education in promoting literacy, examines definitions of literacy, highlights results of recent surveys showing the level at which particular courses are taught, and cites common reactions from college instructors to the low levels at which their courses are taught. Next, 10 criticisms of developmental education are presented and responded to, including: (1) the community college is the wrong place to provide developmental education; (2) developmental education costs too much; (3) developmental education should be taught in a separate school; (4) there is insufficient articulation with secondary schools; (5) faculty members do not know how to teach literacy; (6) there is too much experimentation with too few results; (7) instructors ask too little of the students; (8) there are inconsistent standards used in the classroom; (9) placement and diagnostic tests are not valid; and (10) the support services are not worth what they cost. Responses to these criticisms highlight the fact that community colleges have little choice but to teach developmental education; discuss methods for holding down program costs; argue that all faculty should be involved in developmental education; point to areas in which articulation with secondary schools can be improved; suggest means of improving developmental instruction; and outline ways in which developmental education can be integrated into the fabric of the institution. (HB)

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SPEECH TO CONFERENCE ON "FACING THE CHALLENGES AND CHALLENGERS OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION"

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RESPONDING TO CRITICISMS OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

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SPEECH TO CONFERENCE ON "FACING THE CHALLENGES AND
CHALLENGERS OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION,"
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RESPONDING TO CRITICISMS OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Arthur M. Cohen

Developmental education is a timely topic of this conference because community colleges are going to be involved with it for the next decade at least. It will affect all our work. As an example, since 1974, we at the Center for the Study of Colleges have been working under a succession of grants from various foundations to assess the sciences, social sciences, and humanities in the community colleges. We have learned that the percentage of traditional collegiate courses offered has been declining for the past fifteen years. Why? Occupational education and students' desire for jobs is part of the reason, but only a part. Much of the decline in the liberal arts can be traced to the decline in students' level of literacy. The liberal arts rest on literacy. They suffer when students come to college unable to read and write at a level that fits them for any semblance of the higher learning.

This decline in literacy has brought developmental education to the fore in community colleges. Much work has already taken place. You can learn of some of it from ERIC, the Educational Resources Information Center. We, at the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges have many documents on developmental education in community colleges around the

country. Some sample materials were distributed in your conference packet. We also have papers on student development and the relationships between developmental education and other aspects of the curriculum. Your packet also includes some examples of Junior College Resource Reviews that we have published on developmental education. This year we are doing a series of six more reviews on problems associated with literacy in community colleges. We invite you also to submit reports of your own activities on behalf of stimulating literacy in community colleges.

Kay Martens has asked that I speak with you about criticisms of developmental education. I know your interests are broader than community colleges, but I will confine my remarks to developmental education in those institutions. In the community colleges developmental education is devoted primarily to developing literacy. And literacy is probably most often defined as "the ability to read, write, and compute adequately in context." The words, "in context" nearly always show up as part of the definition. They suggest that there are no absolute standards of literacy, no way of saying that a person is literate or illiterate. The definition comes in the context of a job, of being a citizen of a community, of being a student in a classroom. The definition, "being able to read, write and compute adequately in context," demands that the expectations of the situation be brought in as part of the definition. It is important to bound the definition to a work or academic or social setting, because if it is not so bounded, you find quickly there are as many definitions of literacy as there are people. In community colleges the definition assumes that literacy is what it takes to succeed in the classrooms. Given that standard, developmental education can be monitored, assessed, and shown to be pertinent to institutional purposes.

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As part of our studies of the liberal arts in community colleges nationally, we did a curriculum survey in 1977. We found that one out of every three mathematics courses was being taught at a level less than algebra--that is, arithmetic. Three out of eight English classes were admittedly remedial or developmental (that says nothing about the standards in the so-called collegiate level courses). More recently, in the context of a new project, we surveyed the curriculum in six of the large urban districts that enroll about 15% of all students in American community colleges; Miami-Dade, Chicago, St. Louis, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Maricopa. In those districts, 60% of the mathematics enrollments are less than college algebra. Either the decline in student ability has accelerated in the past few years or the situation has always been more acute in the large districts. We tend to think it is the latter. Further, many students who begin classes do not complete them: half the students in mathematics classes at census week obtain a final passing grade for their courses and 60% of those enrolled in English classes complete them. There is little variation between the districts: the percentage of students completing classes in St. Louis is not much different from the percentage in Dallas or Miami.

When I present such figures to audiences of community college practitioners I sometimes receive a peculiar pattern of responses. First, they deny the data: "Dr. Cohen, you are wrong because in my class it's different." There is a reason for this type of denial. Most instructors are typically attuned to their own classrooms and are not aware of, not concerned with, don't understand, and don't want to know what is going on across the nation. And, they think of individual students, not collectivities. They think of the one student who came

into their class reading at a third grade level, gained two or three grades of achievement in one semester, and eventually transferred and graduated with honors. Most instructors have those types of success stories and they relish them. That's what allows the instructors to survive in face of the greater knowledge of how little their students learn as a group over the years. That's why they shrink from writing specific objectives, predicting group performance, and giving end of course criterion-based examinations. They want to remember the individual successes.

After the denial, after we've convinced the instructors that the data are correct, the second response often is anger: "Even if it's true, you have no right saying it because it gives comfort to our enemies, to people who want to destroy the community college in general, or more specifically, my program within it." They fear that reporting the accurate data about the class levels, curriculum outcomes, course completions, and so on, will be used against them. Their inability to work with the positive aspects of the data translates into anger at those who recount them. They exhibit the behavior of people who know that they live in a political context.

The third response is typically dissociation: "It's not our fault. Blame the breakdown in the nuclear family, the lack of respect for authority, television, the lower schools that don't teach, the universities, anybody but us." They have numerous excuses, villains, ways of refusing to accept responsibility for their students' failure to read and write, for their own inabilities to teach them. My response is that every home has a television set, the universities have problems of their

own, the public schools don't teach well; all the other reasons are as good. But, I also say that this is our milieu. It is what we are given. The community colleges have to deal with this population. It is futile to think of another type of student. We must teach those we have.

For the balance of this talk, I will offer my reactions to ten criticisms of developmental education that I have heard in recent years. Some of these criticisms are valid, some are not. Some are answerable, while others defy a response. The first criticism is that the community college is the wrong place to do developmental education. The argument holds that developmental education belongs better in the adult schools, in the private sector, or in corporate, on-the-job training programs. Or it should be done through the mass media as in Sesame Street, The Electric Company. My response is that the community college may not be the best place to do developmental education, but you are stuck with it. It is going to get a lot more important in the next decade that it has been. Those figures on the numbers of remedial course enrollments are only the beginning. Remedial or developmental education will become the general education for the community colleges of the 1980s.

This trend should not be a surprise to those of you who have been enrolled in the Arizona State Higher Education program or who have otherwise studied the history of higher education in America. In the early part of the nineteenth century, colleges opened for women and coed colleges followed. Thereupon, it became immoral to bar women from collegiate studies. In the later part of the century the land grant colleges opened, making it possible for children of the less affluent to go to college. It then became immoral to bar people of modest income.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s led to the belief that it was immoral to bar members of ethnic minority populations from going to college. More recently, the various financial aid programs have made it immoral to bar the indigent. Most recently, it has become immoral to bar the physically handicapped. And the open access, open door community college finds it unfeasible and, indeed, immoral to bar the ignorant. It has become immoral to deny anyone access to college just because that person cannot read, write, or compute. Your involvement with developmental education rests on that.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the community colleges were dedicated primarily to one theme: <u>access</u>. Open the door, get everyone in, build programs for returning women, veterans, childless couples, displaced homemakers, people with too much time on their hands, people without enough time to learn what they need to know to progress in their specialized area of work. The community colleges built programs to attract people from every corner of the community. And the enrollments swelled. Now that everyone who can reasonably be enticed to come to the institution has enrolled, the next issue is going to be that we have to teach them. There are no more groups out there that have to be matriculated. It's education time now! And, incidentally, even with all those special program for adults of various stripe, half the students in community colleges in America are 22 years old or younger. The modal student is age 19. Your institutions are still the point of first entry to higher education for people coming out of secondary school. (Your murmurings suggest your surprise at those figures. That is probably because many agencies are found of publicizing the mean age which is 29. But the mean is skewed because one program for senior citizens pulls the mean way up. A half dozen 18 year olds and two 62 year olds yields a mean

of 29. But, I don't think the mean age means a whole lot. The median is 22 and the mode is 19.) Thus, the criticism of the community college as the wrong place to do developmental education does not stand. It's your job, it's been assigned to the community colleges, it's a morality question, it's a question of access. Since you are the point of first entry to people out of high school, people who the high schools have been unable to teach, that is the group you must serve.

Second criticism: <u>developmental education costs too much</u>. How many times should the public have to pay to teach the same person how to read? The argument is that developmental education yields a low benefit for a high cost, that the taxpayers will not be willing to pay for the same type of instruction over and over. Many of the community college leaders have responded that it costs less to teach developmental education in community colleges than in universities and other institutions. I think they should stop saying that. I think the community college leaders should stop talking about the economies of the community college versus the university. That makes them sound like a restaurant owner who says, "Our food is not good, but it's cheap." That is not a very apt way of advertising.

Nonetheless, there are many ways of making developmental education better without spending more. The practitioners of instruction, faculty and administrators alike, have yet to understand that para-professional aides can greatly enhance developmental education--as, indeed all other types of education--while holding costs down. Using senior citizens, other lay people, and advanced students as aides to the faculty and tutors to the students who need assistance can be quite salutary. They can assist in numerous ways and they will work for a pittance. Yet,

few college staff members have understood or want to understand how to take advantage of the great pool of economical assistance available in the person of advanced students and senior citizens. The mores of the educators seem to mitigate their understanding that you do not need a $30,000 a year professional person to sit down and work on a one-to-one basis with a student.

Third criticism: <u>developmental education should be operated as a separate department</u>. I've heard many arguments about that, arguments from people on both sides of the question. For myself, I have come down the side of integration. I don't think developmental education should be operated out of a separate department because it becomes isolated. The community colleges are so deeply involved in developmental education that it must involve the total faculty. Every faculty member is affected. In the open access community college the only programs that can control entry are those that are in high demand such as the high technology and the allied health programs. They can afford to be selective and can demand literacy. But, none of the other programs enjoy that prerogative. In all the other curriculums the students must be taught whether or not they can read and write at the outset. Separate developmental studies programs or departments only serve to widen a gulf that already exists between faculty with high pretensions; i.e., those who neither know how nor want to teach literacy, and those who are involved with developmental education all the way. A separate developmental studies department also suggests tracking, a concept that has adverse connotations.

Every program, every department should have a developmental education component within it. Developmental education should be built into the courses in all departments; either separate courses within the

department, or, better, literacy in every course. I have heard anthropology instructors say, "Well what do you want me to do, teach remedial anthropology?" And, I answer, "Yes." You teach literacy in your anthropology classes or you risk losing all your students." Less than five percent of the students in community colleges nationwide complete two years and transfer to the university. Less than 10 percent are enrolled in courses for which there is a prerequisite. The entire institution has become a combination of introductory courses and developmental studies. The community college is well on its way toward becoming a grade-13-plus-less-than-college-level institution. It is in danger of losing the sophomore year. Separate developmental studies departments serve only to accelerate that trend. Developmental education should be integrated into every course.

Fourth criticism: <u>There is insufficient articulation with the secondary schools</u>. This is a justified criticism. When the community college was young, grown out of secondary school districts in many states, many of its instructors taught in the high school in the daytime and in the community college at night. Most of the full-time community college instructors were former secondary school teachers. Now, that connection has been weakened. The community colleges demanded the right to become a part of higher education and, as they did, they tended to turn their backs on the secondary schools. If less than five percent of the community college students complete two years and go to the university, but practically all of them come from the neighboring secondary schools, the community colleges are facing the wrong way. But, they seem unwilling to build bridges to the secondary schools. In our surveys of liberal arts instructors we asked, "Have you ever gone into a secondary school

to discuss your courses with your counterparts or to recruit students to your program?" Only one in ten said that they had. That is an amazing figure. The community colleges seem to be sending a message to the secondary school and to its students that says, "We don't care what goes on there. We will take students as they come and not worry about course articulation."

Educational leaders in some states are trying to rebuild the links between higher education and the secondary schools. The University of California, the California State College and University system, and the California Community Colleges recently issued a joint statement. Addressed to the secondary school, the statement reads in part, students in college preparation programs in grades 9 through 12 should include a minimum of four years of English and a minimum of three years of math. And, merely specifying years is not enough. Specific competencies requisite for successful baccaluareate study must be clearly understood. The statement says also that, "A number of freshmen will begin their postsecondary education without some skills needed for baccalaureate work, and the California institutions of higher education will have to continue to offer remedial education at least for the near future." Educators in other states are similarly aware of the problem. A report from New Jersey notes, "The level of proficiency required to complete three years of high school English and math is considerably lower than the proficiency expected of entering freshmen in the institutions of this state." (ED 185 098). And the president of Miami-Dade Community College has recently collected data on developmental students and presented those data to the secondary schools in his area. He has also arranged a joint meeting between the community college board of trustees and the board of

education to discuss issues of articulation between the high schools and his college.

Criticism five: The faculty don't know how to teach literacy. That criticism may be warranted generally, but there is much variation among instructors. Surely, few instructors enjoy teaching students who do not know how to read and write; most want bright, capable, literate individuals eager to learn the most specialized bits of subject matter that the instructors can put forth. When we asked the liberal arts instructors what it would take to make theirs a better class, nearly half said, "Students better prepared to handle course requirements." They do not want to teach students who do not know how to read and write and this translates itself into an unwillingness to learn how to do it.

Evidence that the faculty is little concerned with trying to teach literacy showed up in some other data as well. We asked the faculty whether they had readers available to them and 11 percent said yes. We asked,"Do you use readers?" And only five percent responded in the affirmative. But nearly 40 percent of them said that released time for themselves would make their class better. Thus, few of the faculty seem to understand that the availability and use of a reader is, in fact, released time for them. If they don't have to read the papers that their students write, then that time is released. But they don't think that way. Most of them build in their own released time by assigning fewer papers. Not incidentally, they thereby shortcut the whole process of literacy development.

This suggests a role for the developmental educator. You should treat the faculty in the collegiate programs as your students. As developmental education specialists you should teach the faculty how to

teach literacy. That should become the central part of your job. Instead of isolating yourself in a separate department to which the collegiate faculty happily send their poorer students, you should work directly with that faculty. That is one of the reasons I believe in integrating developmental studies within the academic departments; it brings the developmental educator into association with the collegiate faculty. It allows the developmental educator to become an educator of instructors.

Criticism six: <u>There is too much experimentation and too few results</u>. That is a justifiable criticism. We know what types of programs work. Every college, every president worth his Rotary Club button can point to a special program where a few dozen students are getting a high intensity experience. Everywhere we go someone is quick to tell us that they have students coming through a program in which they are learning to read so well they are moving up three grade levels in one semester. And, we ask, "How many people were enrolled in that program?" And they respond, "Oh, there were 42 people in it this semester." And then we ask, "How many students are enrolled in your college?" And they respond, "17,460." And we smile and turn away. We know that throwing a high faculty/student ratio, special additional funds, and a high level of involvement for support people at small groups of students yields wondrous results. We have done that. It is time to integrate developmental education into the fabric of the institution.

Criticism seven: <u>We ask too little</u>. That may sound strange, but I have already alluded to it when I said that few teachers use readers, they just assign fewer papers. Writing is a skill learned through practice, just as speaking is a skill learned through practice. We

become literate by reading and writing, whether by joy or coercion or some combination of both. Literacy is developed by doing it. People learn to write by sitting down and writing. Most of the problems in literacy development that are being faced in the community colleges today, that is, the portions of the problem that are in the control of the schools to accommodate, can be traced to declining demands. We haven't asked people to do as much. We don't demand as much reading and writing all the way through the school system as we did a generation ago. Ask less, get less.

Eighth criticism: <u>There are inconsistent standards in the classrooms</u>. This criticism is certainly warranted. Different demands are placed on students in different fields and in different classes in the same field. An alert student can track a path through the college and never have to write a paper. As long as that option is available, it becomes difficult to maintain any type of literacy development in the institution. In our surveys we asked the faculty how many pages in textbooks and other types of materials the students were required to read and how much writing was required. We found tremendous variation not only between fields, but also between instructors in the same field. In an English 1 class, Ms. Jones, who teaches section one, demands a ten page paper. Ms. Smith, who teaches section two of the same class, does not demand an out of class paper, but has her students write paragraphs in class. There was as much variation between instructors teaching the same types of courses in the same disciplines as there was between disciplines. The inconsistency is not between the demands of science and humanities or between college-level and remedial. It is between Jones and Smith.

That criticism has also been applied to developmental courses themselves. It is probably justified but it is difficult to tell. What are the standards in any course that does not have fixed entry and exit criteria? To use the jargon of education, what are the standards of a course in which objectives have not been specified in advance and for which criterion-referenced tests are not administered at the end? If anyone can enter the course-- and in the community colleges now few courses have prerequisites--and if there is a different standard of exit for each student--the value-added approach--it is impossible to tell what the standards are. If the exit criteria were fixed, as in mastery learning, if the objectives were fixed, we would understand better what the standards really are. But in most applications, it is difficult to tell.

Criticism nine: Placement and diagnostic tests are not valid. The tests are usually seen as culturally biased and are not relevant except to English and mathematics. These objections can be countered. Every test of anything is culturally biased; the entire school system is culturally biased. A culture-free test for admission to certain classes in school would be biased if it did not test students' ability to suceed in those classes. The classes are culturally biased; thus, a culture-free test would not be valid.

Of course, the tests are not relevant to courses other than English and math because few people know what instructors in those other courses expect. It is not valid to ask applicants to take a reading test if they may go through the institution taking courses where they just have to watch films. Which tests should be used? And when? Who should administer them? A recent study of the Los Angeles Community College

District found seven different kinds of reading and writing tests being given in the nine colleges of the district (somehow two of the colleges got paired up). Should there be a central testing bureau? Should the counselors do it? Should it be done in the departments?

I'm in favor of testing; the more, the better. Diagnostic tests or criterion tests--there should be more testing. We have let that element of our profession slide. The community college staff are fond of saying that the student is the proper center of attention, and the student should not be tracked or denied entrance. Anyone has the right to enter any course they want. I happen not to go along with that. I think that leads to the kind of anarchy in curriculum that we are seeing now. Twenty thousand students in a college; 20,000 separate curriculums.

Miami-Dade Community College has a procedure whereby any student who enrolls for more than three classes all at once or in sequence, or any student who enrolls for a class in English or math, is sent to the testing center to take a placement examination in English and mathematics. On the basis of the results the student is counseled into certain sections of those courses. But, this type of student flagging depends on a sophisticated student monitoring system. Few institutions are set up to do that. Students may go along taking course after course without ever having been tested. Only when they sign up for an English or math class does the testing procedure come into effect. And even then, it may be a homemade test devised by the members of that department. Nonetheless, more testing is better than less in the current climate.

Last criticism: <u>The support services are not worth what they cost</u>. Counseling, tutorials, learning laboratories, and other types of student learning areas that have been built outside the formal classrooms have

been accused of being too costly for what they provide. That may be so, but there is good reason for it. The reason is that the classroom instructors have tended to have little affiliation with the supportive activities. The learning laboratory is managed by a learning resource director. The tutorial center is managed by some other group. There is very little association between course content and any of the ancillary services. Few instructors work with support people.

That point was brought home in a recent study when we asked students how confident they felt in their abilities to read, write, and perform other tasks associated with the classes they were taking. We asked also if they had taken advantage of the support services available to them and, if not, why not. Of those students who felt below average in their confidence in their abilities, less than 25 percent had been to the counseling center, reading laboratory, or math laboratory. Why? They responded that they did not have time, that they did not think the service was useful, or that no one had asked them to go there. Many respondents said that they did not know that such services were available.

That suggests another role for the developmental educator. You must bring the support activities and the instructors together. Show the instructors how they can use the support services as a way of bolstering their own instruction. Help them integrate the work they are doing in the classrooms with the services available. They, themselves need to feel confident in their use of support services.

In conclusion, I can offer hope. I believe we are turning the corner in the 1980s. I think the slide toward curricular anarchy has gone as far as it can go. I think that the idea of allowing anyone to enter any course is subsiding. I think we have gone as far as we can go

in laissez faire course placement and still maintain the integrity of the institution as a place of learning. We cannot simply let the individuals track themselves into classes as though they were switching television channels. We cannot continue to let them wander in and out almost at will and still maintain institutional integrity.

Various demands for increased linearity in curriculum and student placement are being made. A Florida state legislator has just convinced the State Department of Education that every student in the lower division of every Florida college must take twelve hours of writing instruction in which they write a minimum of 6,000 words, and six hours of mathematics instruction. I recount that because here a legislator specified to a state department what the curriculum should be and the state department agreed. A sophomore-level test is also coming in Florida, an entry test for the upper division. It thus will become in fact an exit test for the community college. Other states will also develop this type of tightening, this shaping of curricular and student flow.

The emphasis on developmental education is not new. Colleges have always been involved with it. We who came into the profession fifteen or more years ago had the luxury of dealing with students who had come through a secondary school system in which they were taught to read and write. Sometime beginning in the mid-1960s, the secondary schools became no longer able to teach the basics of literacy. It was not entirely their fault: as a society we decided that teaching someone to drive a car was more important than teaching them how to write. But, regardless of the reasons, the community colleges have taken the brunt of that failure. There is no place to hide. You cannot screen students away from the collegiate courses; you'd have too many poor students, too

many students who cannot read and write. You cannot isolate developmental studies in a corner of the institution. During the 1980s, it will be at the heart of the curriculum.

The February 3 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education headlined, "Colleges urged to alter tests and grading for benefit of minority group students." The report was made by the Commission on the Higher Education of Minorities. The headline referred to the Commission's argument in favor of the rubber yardstick, of using separate tests and grading standards for minority groups. That reveals the Commission's inability to learn from the experiences of the 1960s and early 1970s. It was then that the colleges built in withdrawal without penalty and suffered subsequent grade inflation and a collapse in standards. But my main concern with the Commission's report relates to a second recommendation it directed toward minority group students wishing to obtain baccalaureate degrees. The Commission suggested that if they had the option of going to a senior institution or to a community college, they should choose the former. A nice recommendation indeed! Given the option between being rich and poor, choose rich. You'll enjoy it more. What the Commission failed to appreciate is that the option of attending a four-year college is available to few community college students.

Will the institution lose its transfer function? Given the type of report that the Commission on the Higher Education of Minorities and other groups have been making, the answer is, certainly. But that would be a disaster for the community college. I believe that a way of maintaining the transfer function in the face of these types of recommendations is to integrate developmental education into that function. It is difficult to defend the transfer function when less than ten percent of

the enrollment is in courses with prerequisites. Yet, that is what is happening; that is what separate areas of developmental studies enhance. It would do a great disservice to the minorities and to all other people as well if the community college lost its legitimacy as a collegiate structure.

The solution is not to undertake misguided action. For example, it is impossible to limit the number of courses an employed student may take; more than 70 percent of the students work now. Nor is it feasible to hold students out of the collegiate courses until they prove they can read; too few students can read at the level we would like. But support services can be mandated; and tutorials and learning laboratory activities can be integrated with classroom instruction. Every instructor can demand reading and writing in every classroom. You can offer exit tests so that you can demonstrate what your programs have actually done whether or not the students transfer.

At this conference, you should be careful that you integrate your ideas, your knowledge of what developmental education is and can be, with the realities of the community college. You live in a political context, but you work in an institutional context. Both must be accommodated. The Arizona State project has made great strides in helping define problems in literacy. This conference should be a great success and I wish you well.

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